Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 9
Issue 1 *April 2005*

Article 6

11-28-2016

Dogville

Todd Comer
Michigan State University, toddcomer@gmail.com

Dogville

Abstract
This is a review of *Dogville* (2003).

Dogville recapitulates many of Lars von Trier's trademark themes. In *Dancer in the Dark* and *Breaking the Waves*, von Trier was concerned with the nature of goodness and how a certain kind of goodness could be seen as mad, neurotic, or myopic by those bound up in conventional moral structures. There are, in other words, two options: a morality that builds up the self, patrols moral borders, bolsters rationality, and leads to exclusion and an ethics that surmounts these borders and finds a relation to the other.

This tension between morality and ethics can clearly be seen in *Dogville*'s plot which is as straightforward as it is slow and meticulously violent. Grace (Nicole Kidman), fleeing the mob and the authorities, seeks asylum in *Dogville* with the assistance of Tom Edison (Paul Bettany), her enlightened and hopelessly ineffectual lover. The townspeople are reluctant to risk themselves, nor, they say, can Grace offer them anything in return.

Soon enough there is work, a tremendous amount of work, and physical and sexual violence as well. The town, which has no need of help, very quickly ensnares Grace in an endless circle of reciprocity. *Dogville* puts Grace/grace to work. To our horror, Grace holds nothing back and insanely makes excuses for the townspeople.

Von Trier is relatively subtle about his theme until the very end when the mob returns and we discover that Grace was fleeing from her father, representative

of the Judeo-Christian Law. What marks this film as a departure for von Trier is less the scarcity of props than his meditation on the nature of the border and, ultimately, the nature of justice.

All the action takes place on a sound stage. There are no actual buildings. Just as Elm Street boasts no elms, these "buildings" possess no walls; chalk lines delimit each building. If each one of these buildings may be thought of as a trope for individual identity, *Dogville* implies that human identity is essentially communal-that is, not separate from others. However, the townspeople act as if they are self-created, all-powerful egos. As Cartesian subjects, they invent borders where there are none and in this way preserve (or create) their selves, stabilize morality, and maintain their individual and town economies.

Grace confronts the town with its subjectival blindness. As with the elderly blind man (Ben Gazzar), she pulls back the curtains and shows us how very little separates us from one another. Grace is that which allows the light in, a trope at times for otherness.

Grace's father (James Caan) drives into town in a limousine with drawn curtains (well-drawn borders). He is, like the townspeople, a Cartesian figure who patrols borders and visits violence on those who owe him. Shortly after his arrival,

Dogville is burned to the ground for its mistreatment of Grace. Grace, for her part, personally kills Tom.

This final killing is not, however, an act of violence of the *Dogville* variety. *Dogville*'s populace creates walls where there are none to shield themselves from the violence they commit. At the point of punishment which Grace instigates, she opens the car's curtains. Neither Grace nor the Law, the film suggests, are adequate on their own, but must work in tandem. Justice is, as Emmanuel Levinas says, relation to the other: judgment remains, but rather than being meted out behind closed borders, it occurs in relation to the other with much fear and much trembling as evidenced by Grace's tears.

One could view *Dogville* as a response to those critics who see postmodernism as mere relativism. Truth is not dead in postmodernism, *Dogville* implies. Truth (the grounding for all judgment) remains, but is exposed to the outside, to others, and to relation. Truth is here, somehow, more just.

The nature of representation-i.e., borders-is to bring reality and our idea of reality flush, that is, to stabilize reality and remove that gap or opening that allows us to be in relation to others. A similar argument could therefore be made for *Dancer in the Dark* and *Breaking the Waves* insofar as von Trier's deliberate rejection of realism and experiments with the hand-held camera suggest. Neither of

these films, however, thematizes the breaching of the representation as relation to the other, nearly so profoundly or directly as *Dogville*.

[This review greatly benefited from conversations with Dawn Comer, Matthew McCrady, and Jeremy Dowsett]